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LABOR CONDITIONS IN SOVIET RUSSIA¹

In the face of the dearth of information on the internal affairs of Soviet Russia, the appearance of a 400-page report and bibliography on labor conditions is a promise of light in dark places. The International Labor Office, a part of the machinery of the League of Nations which is actually in operation, has assembled the available documents in an attempt to present evidence free from all prejudice and political consideration. M. Albert Thomas, the director of the Labor Office, calls it "the most complete study that exists from the bibliographical point of view and the most coherent from the point of view of social legislation on the Bolshevik régime."

The work had its origin at a meeting of the governing body of the International Labor Office, held in January, 1920, when M. Sokal, the Polish government delegate, proposed the appointment of a commission "to study the industrial conditions and the situation of the working classes in certain eastern European countries and in particular in Soviet Russia." It devolved upon the Labor Office to draw up the program for the inquiry. Since it proved to be impractical to begin an investigation in Russia before the declaration of peace, it was held to be of utmost importance to proceed at once to gather all the material bearing upon labor conditions in Russia available in western Europe. Accordingly, in February and March, 1920, research was undertaken, under the direction of Dr. Pardo, one of the first members of the staff of the Office, in Paris and London. Supplementary investigations were made in Switzerland, Sweden, Italy, and Germany.

Compulsory work.—On coming into power, the Bolsheviks enacted a great mass of social legislation which had the effect of extreme regulation of industrial operations. Much of this has since been modified to meet the needs of the extraordinary situations which faced the new government. The urgent requirement for increased production led to the introduction of compulsory work. Perhaps no other phase of labor conditions in Soviet Russia has been the subject of more discussion. To western trade unionists who have jealously guarded the right to strike as absolutely essential to the liberty of the worker, enforced labor is an unacceptable idea.

¹Prepared for the Mission of Enquiry in Russia by the International Labor Office, Harrison and Sons, London, 1920.

The Russian Constitution of July 10, 1918, proclaims:

The Russian Socialist Soviet Republic considers it the duty of every citizen of the republic to work, and adopts as motto: "He who does not work will not eat."

Lenin is quoted in a passage from *Soviets at Work* to show the development of the principle enunciated in the constitution:

The introduction of obligatory labor service should be started immediately, but it should be introduced gradually and with great caution, testing every step by practical experience, and, of course, introducing first of all obligatory labor service for the rich.

The editor of the report remarks that while the principle originally formulated was in no way alarming, the recent applications of it appear to be very extensive. The state has since assumed "the right to oblige the citizen to work and even to assign to him the work he must do, and to punish him if he does not obey. *Human labor is the property of the state.*"

The permanent exemptions from compulsory labor as stated in Articles 2 and 3 of the Russian Labor Code, 1919, were those persons under sixteen or over fifty and those who had lost their working ability as a result of mutilations and illness. Temporary exemptions were made for persons who were ill and for pregnant women. Articles 10 and 11 provide that:

Persons subject to compulsory labor have the right to apply their labor in accordance with their speciality . . . but if this class of work is not available . . . must accept the work offered.

Toward the end of 1919 the government had 3,000 factories to run and compulsory labor became "the burning question of the day The state, according to the Bolshevik idea, feeds the population by making itself the organizer of a colossal exchange of industrial products against agricultural products. To insure the success of this exchange the state had to have full and absolute control over all the existing economic forces, including that of labor. . . . We see thus that the nationalization of industry and commerce brings with it in its train compulsory labor."

The idea of militarization of labor was soon to become a characteristic of the Bolshevik régime. The idea is expressed in a document of Trotsky's in December, 1919, entitled *Liberty of Labor and Obligation to Work*. In this he said:

As long as universal labor service has not become habitual and is not considered absolutely necessary by everybody (which will only be accomplished

by education, and will only receive its full application in the next generation), the transition to a régime of universal labor service can only be accomplished by coercion, that is to say by the armed forces of the state.

At the third Congress of Economic Councils in January, 1920, Lenin, indorsing militarization, said:

We have now a phenomenon common between two periods, the period occupied entirely with war and the peace period. The former is not yet finished, for it is certain that the capitalists will try again to attack Russia; by all sorts of maneuvers and promises they wish to compel Poland to march against us. . . . *We must now adapt our war apparatus to new work* The situation is this: on the one hand, famine, cold, and typhus, and on the other a colossal energy, the extraordinary will of the working and peasant masses *In order to execute this task with the colossal rapidity required, we must create armies of labor, we must concentrate all our forces on the labor front with the maximum of tension, with a truly military spirit of implacable decision.*

The editor's comment on these passages is as follows:

Nothing could be more frank than these words on the liberty of labor. This liberty is illusory if the country is dying of hunger. To conquer famine labor must be organized, and the state alone must be free to concentrate the efforts of the citizens on the most urgent necessities.

The extent to which this program has been put into practice is not known. At the beginning compulsory labor appears to have been confined to work necessary to run the important industries. A decree dated November, 1919, made woodcutting and the transport of fuel and military supplies compulsory and called women as well as men to work. A wireless message dated January 5, 1920, tells of the organization of a commission to register all skilled labor and to put it into operation. The same commission was to "insure the participation of the garrisons in agricultural work and others demanding a mass of man-power." Trotsky, nominated president of this commission, addressed a stirring exhortation to the first labor army, the results of whose work are said to have been extraordinary.

No light is thrown upon the relation of this commission and the unions, or upon the fate of the labor distribution bureaus.

A wireless message dated February 10, 1920, stated that the appeals of the people's commissaries and of the Central Committee for the intensification of labor were finding "an enthusiastic echo through all Russia." An incomplete message on the following day mentions the institution of *labor identity books*. These books were to serve as passports and would only be issued "to workers and employees according to lists

furnished by the enterprises where they work. . . . Once the distribution is finished, all those who have no labor booklets will be sent to work by the Labor Distribution Section."

Messages received later in February spoke of the creation of two new labor armies "to ameliorate transport in the southeastern railway region," and of others in the Urals, the Ukraine, and the Caucasus. A letter from the correspondent of the *Daily News* (February 27) stated that "labor generally is being militarized to an amazing extent." Four of Trotsky's six armies had been turned into labor armies. "The Bolsheviks boast that not another government in the world would dare to turn troops mobilized for fighting purposes into ranks of laborers immediately after they have triumphantly terminated a bloody war."

Disciplinary labor tribunals were empowered to enforce the observance of the compulsory labor decree. These tribunals were authorized to fix penalties which were in the maximum "almost equivalent to penal servitude."

The account of compulsory labor in Russia concludes with the unsatisfactory statement that it is impossible to say to what extent such labor has been actually practiced, what penalties have been inflicted, or what results have been obtained.

Unemployment.—Obviously unemployment ceases to exist where the plan of compulsory labor is effectively used. No information is given as to the details of the transition from the earlier period, when unemployment was apparently serious, to the state of affairs in which compulsory labor was considered necessary. The documents concern the earlier unemployment legislation, the substance of which appears not to have been repealed.

The legislation of 1917 dealing with unemployment had the double aim of prevention and relief. A system of labor exchanges provided for the distribution of the workers among the different industries and apportioned relief in conformity with the law insuring against unemployment. The scarcity of food in many regions where workers were needed proved a great obstacle in adjusting the supply of labor. Refusals to accept work became frequent, and in September, 1918, the Commissary of Labor issued a decree forbidding such refusals. The labor exchanges were empowered to distribute the unemployed in their own or allied trades. Harvest and food transport work were made obligatory without respect to the trade to which the unemployed workers belonged. If transfer to another locality became necessary, unmarried workers were sent first. The penalties for refusal to work were chiefly deprivation

of monetary help for three months and of the right of registration in a labor exchange.

In 1918 the statutes establishing the labor exchanges were annulled and a new department of the Commissariat of Labor, the Department of the Distribution of Labor, was created. The functions of its local offices were similar to those of the exchanges. An unemployed person still had no right to refuse work, even if the work was outside his specialty. Violations of the rules of labor distribution were made punishable by fine or imprisonment.

The establishment of unemployment funds was provided for by decrees in November and December, 1917. These funds were to be maintained by contributions from employers at a minimum of 3 per cent of the wages paid. Daily payments were to be made to the unemployed, equal in amount to their total salaries, in case unemployment lasted more than three days. General municipal funds were to be instituted in towns and districts. A law passed in August, 1918, provided that after nationalization enterprises must continue to pay the sums fixed by law for insurance. In October, 1918, it was decreed that the amount subscribed should be 5 per cent of the wage for season workers and 4 per cent for other workers.

The usual paucity of information with regard to the application of the law is pleaded, and the small amount of evidence available as to its success or failure is not consistent. The account concludes with the following statement:

The recent application of compulsory labor must have had a decided effect on unemployment. What these effects are, our data do not tell us, nor do they enable us to give a definite opinion on the subject.

The length of the working day.—The Russian Labor Code of 1919 adopted the general principle of the eight-hour day, but practically all of the provisions regarding overtime and suspension of work could be set aside until the end of hostilities "by agreement with the workers of the undertaking concerned and their trade unions." No statistics were found to show the customary working hours of the various industries in Russia after the passage of the legislation, but it is stated that "the working time-table was very irregular in the various factories, everything depending on the fickle will of the workers' congresses of control. . . . But the necessity to increase production is driving the Russian government to experiment with the various systems tending to increase the amount of labor applied to industry."

Voluntary work.—During the latter half of 1919 a system of *voluntary work*, or work on Saturday (and sometimes also on Sunday) was inaugurated. It is not clear whether this term is used to indicate simply overtime or work outside the worker's specialty. "Bolshevik wireless" messages are quoted to indicate the prevalence of Saturday work. Only three of the eight messages quoted on pages 34-36 to establish this point actually mention Saturday (or Sunday) work, and one of these refers to students of the Communist party. A letter from Mr. George Lansbury of the London *Daily Herald* mentions the increase of overtime and of voluntary work, which "means that people work at occupations other than their normal ones in order to assist the nation." It is finally concluded from wireless messages "which evidently come from official sources" that "the working day is still in principle eight hours, but as a temporary measure, to overcome the crisis in production and transport at present raging in Russia, the working day is prolonged to ten hours and the weekly rest on Sunday now done away with." After this definite statement, however, the editor presents questions as to whether this measure has actually been applied, and whether it covers cases where work is compulsory.

The work of women and children.—The labor of women and children was limited by the decrees of 1917 to a greater extent, in many respects, than it has been restricted in western countries. Women could not work overtime or at night, and were exempt from compulsory labor eight weeks before and eight weeks after confinement (Code of Labor laws). The employment of children under fourteen, of children under sixteen for more than four hours a day, and of children under eighteen for more than six hours a day was prohibited. Children under sixteen could not be employed at night or at compulsory labor. On account of war conditions, many of these restrictions were apparently removed temporarily.

The Code of 1919 stipulated that "working women who execute the same work in quality and quantity as men receive the same salary as the latter." The wages of apprentices were fixed for the various trades, but no one over eighteen years of age was admitted as an apprentice.

Wages.—The Supreme Council of Popular Economy published a decree on December 19, 1917, fixing a basis for wage scales. The elements to be taken into consideration were the cost of living, the professional ability of the wage-earner, and the danger incurred, as well as economic conditions in general. As these vary in the different regions of the country, a commission with representatives from the central

professional organizations was set up for the purpose of determining the regions and the fundamental rates. Subsequently the actual method appears to have been for the trade unions interested or the Central Executive Committee of Soviets to work out a project which was confirmed by the Commissariat of Labor and published as a decree. In June, 1918, and following, a tendency toward payment in kind appeared, owing to the depreciation of money. Although payment in general was on a time basis, piece work also existed. A decree of the Commissariat of Labor published in January, 1918, stated that "piece work must be done in all cases where the salary commissions in agreement with the work committees find it expedient to employ this system in the interests of normal production and find it to be technically possible." The Code of Labor laws for 1919 stipulated that "remuneration for piece work is determined by the calculation of the daily tariff rates divided by the quantity of pieces constituting the standard production."

The editor laments the lack of information in regard to the working out of the wage legislation and the ability of the workingman to obtain the necessities of life with the wages paid. The evidence is considered insufficient for a decision whether the system adopted by the Bolshevik government "is one of the causes of the ruin of Russian industry, or if on the contrary it was the best system to adopt in the exceptional circumstances then reigning in the country."

Trade unions.—The chapter on trade unions is one of the most confused and unsatisfactory in the report. It appears to have suffered from the difficulties in translation by persons unfamiliar with the corresponding trade-union terminology in English. An instance of this is the designation of "professional unions" and "professional problems" (pp. 187, 190). The discussion of the political relations between the trade unions and the government ends with a declaration of "absence of documentation" on the subject and of the need for further investigation in Russia.

The greater number of trade unions apparently disappeared during the early years of the Great War. After the Bolshevik revolution the unions revived and increased in membership. At the first congress of trade unions in January, 1918, 4,000,000 workers were represented. By the decree of August, 14, 1918, the trade unions were to send representatives to the Supreme Council of National Economy (thirty out of sixty-nine members), and to nominate representatives in several other governing bodies.

The functions of the trade unions are characterized as being on the one hand political (representation in the soviets), and on the other

economic (participation in the administration and management of factories and the regulation of working conditions). The *Professionalny Vestnik* (the *Syndicalist Messenger*) is quoted as giving the number of enrolled workers in a list of principal industries in 1918 as 60 per cent.

The organizations were industrial in form. The Metal Workers' Union, for example, comprised 290 different trades. The local unions were grouped in provincial unions which united in national or all-Russian groups. The 50 all-Russian unions were united in the Russian Central Council of Trade Unions.

Trade unions were apparently divided in 1918 over "nationalization," which is here defined as the question "whether the unions should collaborate with the state in order to attain objects of a general political or economic order." In the discussions of the trade-union congress of 1918, the Bolshevik members took the position that the unions should collaborate fully with the state in socialist reconstruction, while the Mensheviks and the Monarchist Syndicalists took the opposite position.

The nationalization of industry.—By 1918 about 36 per cent of the industrial undertakings in Russia were nationalized (that is, taken over by the central government). By the middle of 1919 the number of nationalized factories had increased to 3,000, or 90 per cent of the industries of the country.

The central machinery for this vast undertaking of nationalization was the Supreme Council of Popular Economy, which had wider powers than those of any other European ministry. This council had authority to regulate absolutely the economic life of the country. It was in its turn subordinate to the Council of People's Commissaries. "The council is elective, the predominant elements coming from the trade unions and the district councils of popular economy."

The local administration of each factory was in the hands of a director and a manager appointed by the appropriate sections of the Supreme Council of Popular Economy. The manager was assisted by an administrative economic council consisting of representatives of workers, employees, the technical and commercial staff, the director, the local trade union, the Workers' Co-operative, and the Council of Peasants' Delegates. The number of workers' and employees' representatives was not to exceed one-half of the total number of the council. Practically nothing is known of the actual working of this organization.

The present demoralization of Russian industry is generally admitted. Those hostile to the Soviet system attribute this in large part to nationalization and the hasty and badly organized methods by which it has been carried out. The Bolsheviks "ascribe the catastrophe to causes wholly

unconnected with nationalization." In their opinion these causes are the inheritance of five years of war, the civil war instigated by the Allies, the demobilization of industry, and the blockade. The report states that "in the present state of documentary evidence, it is almost impossible to express a definite opinion on this question."

Only fragmentary evidence is presented as to the actual operation of industry under workers' control, a form of direction which was tried in the early days of the Bolshevik régime. Commissary Schmidt is quoted as follows:

Of course, control by the workers, as it was first introduced, led speedily to many absurdities and, much to the dissatisfaction of the extremer elements, has been considerably modified. It was realized that the workers in any particular factory might, by considering their own interests, harm the community as a whole, and so, in the long run, themselves.

By the beginning of 1919 centralized control had superseded local control. In January, 1920, Lenin spoke of the management of the nationalized industries as follows:

Practical work depends upon the responsibility of one person, because this system enables one to discover and utilize the actual efficiency of each worker It is evident trade unions must take part in economic administration, as this is the foundation of our program but it is sufficient for them to put forward candidates.

In the chapter in *Soviets at Work*, entitled "The Need of Specialists," Lenin wrote:

Without the help and direction of specialists in the various branches of learning, of technique, and endowed with experience, the change to socialism is impossible We have at present been obliged to resort to the middle-class method and promise a very high rate of remuneration in order to obtain the services of the most important middle-class specialists It is true that high salaries involve great danger; they exercise a corrupt influence. But every reasonable man must agree that we cannot free ourselves of the evils of capitalism at one stroke. . . .

The co-operative societies.—The relation of the Russian co-operatives to the Soviet government has been one of international interest since the attempt of the Entente in January, 1920, to resume economic relations with Russia through their agency. The history of the great development of Russian co-operation just prior to the war and of its continued growth through the war period and afterward, is given largely in the words of Mme Lenskaja in her report on Russian co-operation at the Co-operative Congress at Genoa in April, 1920. Co-operation "pro-

tested vigorously against the overthrow of the Kerensky government" and against the Brest-Litovsk treaty. The Soviet government first "disdained co-operation" and later made use of the co-operatives. In December, 1918, Lenin said:

The Soviet government has reached a stage of reconstruction where the efforts of all classes of workers must be brought into action. The experience and capacity of the co-operative organizations can be particularly helpful in the realization of its end.

According to Mme Lenskaja, the soviet authorities made a "complete seizure" of co-operation in the fusion of the economic organizations of the state with the co-operative societies. It appears, however, that the co-operative leaders remained at their posts and "by a strange paradox the co-operatives are thus at one and the same time all powerful and in subjection. It is they alone who insure the provisioning of Russia, but they are no longer masters of their own destiny." It is not known whether the co-operatives are today "more than an institution of the Soviet state."

Appended to the report is a bibliography of 107 pages listing the books, pamphlets, and newspaper and magazine articles which formed the source material of the report. Critical notes on various publications are also added. These are in fact brief descriptions and summaries of 65 miscellaneous publications of 1918 and 1919.

It should be remembered that the primary purpose of the report was to point the way for a future commission of inquiry. The haste with which the work has been done is perhaps pardonable because of the urgency of the need. More thorough editorial work would have improved the classification and typography, eliminated the vagueness with which reference to sources is usually made, and given greater definiteness of application to many of the statements. To cite two examples only: the Supreme Council of National Economy (p. 177), the Supreme Council of Popular Economy (p. 195), and the Supreme Council of Public Economy (p. 200), leave the reader in doubt as to the number of bodies referred to.

More disturbing than superficial evidences of haste is the impression one gains that much of the work has been done by persons inexperienced in handling documentary material. Nevertheless, the volume stands as a monument of industry applied in the short time of its preparation and comprises one of the most important contributions yet made to the highly important task of understanding Russia.

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